Verbs: Voice

Voice is a property of verbs that indicates the relationship between the subject and the verb. There are four main voices, two that make structural (syntactic) differences in sentences and two that make semantic differences.

Syntactic voices:

- Active—the subject does or is: The cat ate the cheese; the cat is getting fat; who says the cat is fat?
- Passive—the doer or be-er is backgrounded and can be omitted: the cheese was eaten (by the cat); mistakes were made; were mistakes made?

Semantic voices—these look active, but the subject doesn't do or be, which is why there's a difference:

- Middle voice—looks active syntactically, but the subject doesn't do; things happen sometimes: the ship sank; the vase broke; the snow fell (the subjects don't do because these items cannot do—they are inanimate)
- Medio-passive voice—looks active syntactically, but the subject does for itself because of what it is as itself: the motorcycle drives loudly; the poem scans readily; does your new car drive smoothly?

There are more options, but not so much for English. We might be able to make more semantic distinctions—any suggestions?

In case it wasn't quite clear:

- Syntax is about how words work together to make a sentence; in English, this is primarily word order.
- Semantics is about how meaning is conveyed via words, parts of words, combinations of words, and combinations of parts of words.
- Semantics and syntax interact in important and interesting ways, which is why there's a field of inquiry in linguistics on the syntax-semantics interface.